

Federal official: Brucellosis buffer zone feasible

*By SCOTT McMILLION Chronicle Staff Writer
Article published July 3, 2007*

Creating a brucellosis buffer zone around Yellowstone National Park is a feasible idea, a federal disease control official said Monday, but making it happen won't be easy.

Theresa Howes, spokeswoman for the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, said she and the federal agency's top veterinarian, Tom Clifford, met in June with Gov. Brian Schweitzer to discuss the possibility.

"We were encouraged, all of us, by the thought that that could be a way for Montana to go," Howes said.

Schweitzer has for more than two years pushed the idea of a buffer or "hot zone" in the southern reaches of Park, Gallatin and Madison counties. All cattle entering or leaving the zone would be tested for brucellosis, a disease found in May in a Bridger herd, the first Montana outbreak since 1985. The herd had links to a Paradise Valley herd, which has since tested disease free.

Schweitzer said last week the disease appears to have been transmitted from elk. He also said it is likely that more cases will be found, sooner or later.

"It's coming and we need to be prepared for it," he said.

If another case arises, the entire state — with 2.5 million cattle — loses its brucellosis-free status. That means expensive testing and possibly a loss of marketing opportunities — especially for purebred cattle producers — Schweitzer said.

"The Mulligan is over," he said. "The next shot's for real."

That's why Schweitzer wants a separate administrative zone around Yellowstone National Park, which is the largest remaining reservoir of the disease in the nation.

"You're ranching in an area that has a lot of elk with brucellosis and everybody else is not," Schweitzer said. Ranchers hundreds of miles away shouldn't suffer if brucellosis appears in cattle near Yellowstone.

Alan Redfield, who raises cattle in Paradise Valley, said it's unfair to penalize ranchers with healthy animals.

"I didn't start the problem. I just happen to be living where I do," Redfield said. "The cattle aren't the problem. The bison and elk are the problem. Why do we have to extend Yellowstone Park boundaries?"

Schweitzer said the buffer zone line could be drawn somewhere around Pray in Park County, north of West Yellowstone in Gallatin County and Cameron in Madison County.

However, many ranchers routinely move cattle in and out of those zones.

Redfield grazes cattle east of Livingston part of the year, but doesn't have facilities there for testing, a time consuming and expensive process.

"Does that mean I have to build a facility?" he asked.

Park County Agricultural Extension Agent Marty Malone said keeping track of those movements would be a bookkeeping and enforcement headache.

"I don't think the state's got enough money to police it," he said. "If the governor does this, he needs to think about those guys out there who are going to take a big hit."

Leaders in the state's beef industry are divided on the buffer zone plan. The Montana Farm Bureau and the Montana Stockgrowers Association have panned the idea. The Montana Cattlemen's Association supports the zone. Last week, former Cattlemen's Association President Dennis McDonald, also chairman of the Montana Democratic Party, called on other beef organizations to get on board.

"Certain leadership among various cattle organizations has difficulty adapting to change," McDonald wrote in a guest editorial published in the Livingston Enterprise newspaper June 27.

Schweitzer said bison management would not change with the creation of a buffer zone. The animals would still be hunted in the winter and hazed back into Yellowstone National Park in the spring, he said.

"This is more about elk," he said, because that species is the likely suspect for outbreaks in Wyoming and Idaho, and now in Montana.

Howes said it likely would take six months to set up a new administrative district, and the state would have to submit a detailed application for the divided status.

"It's quite rigorous," she said. "We would work with the state through the application process."

It's further complicated by the fact that, if a special zone is established here, Howes said, the possibility of similar zones in foreign countries such as Mexico would have to be addressed.

Redfield said he worries about an ever-expanding buffer zone. Ranchers have dealt with the disease with their own animals, at considerable labor and expense, but the publicly owned wildlife still carry brucellosis, he said.

Schweitzer said the state is already divided for other agricultural products, such as potatoes, to control diseases or pests.

"Nobody wants to divide up the state, but we've done it before," he said.

The brucellosis buffer zone is a matter of protecting the statewide industry, he said, and he wants more support from ranchers.

"I'm frustrated," he said. "This is nearly three years that I've been pushing this. You need people to pull on the rope, not push on it."

Scott McMillion is at scottm@dailychronicle.com
